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ABSTRACT

An examination of the stylistic differences among writing from literary specialists, from science, and from social science shows that a more precise diagnosis of the writing problems of clarity and coherence is possible. Ten randomly selected paragraphs from each of four publications, the "Canadian Medical Association Journal," the "Canadian Journal of Political Science," "Canadian Literature," and "Publications of the Modern Language Association," were analyzed, using Robert Kaplan's functional rhetoric of English prose as a model. In the samples that were hardest to read, authors had failed to establish topics forcefully and to pick them up and trace them through the discourse blocs with effective sentence structure. Results of the study indicated three generalizations necessary to identifying problems of coherence: English prose usually proceeds from generalizations to specifics; it is usually unsympathetic toward tangential topics; and good writers of English pick up, and treat in sequence, everything they introduce. (Examples of analyzed paragraphs are appended.) (AEA)

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Contrastive Rhetoric: Diagnosing Problems in Coherence

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Among composition teachers, what to teach is a topic of endless debate. Some of us argue for grammar, some promote argument, still others stress self-expression. Yet we all agree on one point: writing should be clear. But how to teach clarity--that's another problem. The fact is that most of us don't teach it. We have little idea how to do more than mark students' blunders with symbols like question marks and AWK, the offensive abbreviation for an awkward construction. Students justifiably reply to our own vagueness with "You know what I mean" or "It's clear to me."

Advanced students are particularly aggressive on this subject. At the advanced level the defense often becomes polarized by departments: social science students, for example, accuse English teachers of wanting everyone to write like English majors, while they want to write like anthropologists. "Anthropologists will understand me," they claim. "I'm writing like them, and that's what's going to get me a job."

The question these protests imply has troubled me for a long time: Do separate fields have demonstrable differences in style that should be taught? I have wondered whether it is true that problems in clarity in certain fields come from jargon acceptable within the fields, and if so, whether the jargon should be overlooked. I finally decided to examine stylistic differences among several fields for principles that should be acknowledged in general writing classes.

For my study I began by drawing upon rather informal impressions and a certain concensus in English departments in order to choose which fields to use: I decided that I would have a good variety of prose styles if I compared writing from literary specialists, from science, and from social science. After reaching this point, I was somewhat constrained by the availability of sources where I was going to do this research--the University of Southern California in Los Angeles--in the matter of selecting samples. Since I teach in a Canadian University, I wanted to use prose acceptable for publication in Canadian journals. (National boundaries make little difference to most scholars when it comes to publishing, but nationalism can enter into arguments about style.) At USC I found the Canadian Medical Association Journal, the Canadian Journal of Political Science, and Canadian Literature to fit my needs. As a control model to provide a standard for educated written English prose, I used the prestigious Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA). Finally I had ten randomly selected paragraphs from each of these publications to form my corpus.[1]

The next step was to find a model for analyzing the prose. For this I turned to research in English as a second language, since like a number of others applying linguistics to research in composition, I have found that research in English as a second language offers some of the most useful insights. In the present case, Robert Kaplan's work in contrastive rhetoric proved to suit my need, for when Kaplan contrasts the structure of written English discourse with the discourse structure of other languages,

he gives models of English prose against which I could compare the various styles of academic writing.

Of course to use Kaplan, I had to assume him to be right. But after several years of looking at problems in students' essays with Kaplan's hypotheses in mind, I was already persuaded that Kaplan's "functional rhetoric" had merit. It has seemed to me that when prose has the structure Kaplan finds typical for English, it is clear, granted, of course, that other matters like vocabulary and the author's underlying intention are clear. I had already discovered that I could suggest changes to my students based on Kaplan's notions and see improvements in their work.

I cannot digress into a major explanation of "functional rhetoric" at this point; there is room only to summarize Kaplan's concepts in brief before I move on to what I discovered about academic prose.

Building on the work of Willis Pitkin, Francis Christensen, and others[2] Kaplan speaks in terms of "discourse blocs" rather than paragraphs. "Discourse blocs" are unified aggregates of prose "in which every item is related" syntactically or semantically" to every other item by coordination, subordination and supraordination." "Discourse units" are those pieces of prose which are related to one another within the bloc.[3] The first example illustrates how to analyze a paragraph using "functional rhetoric." First you outline the bloc, making the first item on the outline the topic sentence or prefatory statement for the bloc. Next you underline the head words and indicate whether

each unit is coordinate, subordinate, or supraordinate to the topical unit. To determine these relationships you underline head words and bloc signals, the semantic and syntactic devices that link the various particles of the discourse. (I have found that it helps to show relationships on the outline by indenting, as well.) The outlining shows the movement and coherence of the bloc.

Looking closely at the arrangement of information within the discourse bloc, Kaplan has found that usually the "head" syntactic element defines the nature of the topic in its Noun Phrase and points the direction of development for the rest of the bloc in its Verb Phrase; thus the head "defines the limits of the bloc."[4] What happens in subsequent discourse units is that in units of sentence length, for example, "the base NP carries explicit 'old' information derived either from some preceding element of the discourse or directly from the environment . . . . The base VP then carries explicit 'new' information which advances the argument in some direction."[5] Apparently when a unit consists of several sentences, characteristic movement consists of the Noun Phrases carrying particles of the same information, and the Verb Phrases establishing the relationships of such information, with the exception of the Verb Phrase that advances the argument. Embedded elements like nominalizations and locative, instrumental, and appositive embeddings carry either "old" information or information that is merely tangential. If a writer ignores these principles or over-uses other patterns, the reader may become tired or misled by searching for meaning in uncharacteristic patterns.

In Example 1, the opening sentence of the discourse bloc constitutes a discourse unit and stands as the prefatory statement/topic sentence of the unit. The next four sentences constitute a second discourse unit, which modifies the first and is therefore subordinate to the first. The following sentence, the sixth, which begins "Helical gears," forms a discourse unit which modifies the first unit in the same way. Hence this third discourse unit is subordinate to the first and coordinate with the second. I have indented the subordinate units to make their relation to the topic sentence of the bloc easy to perceive, just as the parts of each unit are indented to signify their relationships to the head of the unit: II A is a subordinate modifier of the head of II, and so on. There are many words which make the prose cohesive, but the words Kaplan sees as key words acting as bloc signals are underlined.

To analyze my forty samples of academic prose, I photocopied them, then read them as objectively as I could to form a holistic impression of their clarity. In this preliminary reading I found the political science paragraphs hard to read, with only two exceptions, but my difficulty did not stem from a lack of background on their topics. I had trouble reading several paragraphs from Canadian Literature, as well. By this time I was sure that the lexicon was not the problem, in either case. rather I simply could not follow the topics of the paragraphs as I should have been able to do. But then when I read the paragraphs from the Medical Association Journal, even though I did not understand the lexicon, the prose seemed structured clearly. The structure was boring, yet it gave me the impression that I would have comprehended the contents of these samples

more quickly than the others, had I known the meaning of the medical terms. My initial impression, then, was that the medical samples were the clearest.

Having read the first thirty samples, I was eager to see how I would respond to the prose of the PMLA. I soon saw that although I again had the sense of entering in medias res because I had taken the paragraphs from the body, and not the introduction, of the essays, I did not feel disoriented by the language as I did with the Journal of Political Science so often. Persuaded by now that field-specific terms were not causing the incoherence, I hoped the discourse analysis would pinpoint the problems.

The rest of the examples represent the writing I analyzed, the first paragraph illustrating several chronic problems. In the samples that were hardest to read, authors had failed to establish topics forcefully and to pick them up and trace them through the discourse blocs with effective sentence structure. Instead of using structure to emphasize key ideas, authors had stressed empty or irrelevant material, and had buried or omitted words the reader needed to keep the central topic clearly in mind. Authors had also failed to provide sufficient or precise bloc signals so that the subordinate, coordinate, and supraordinate relationships between the parts of the bloc were difficult to discern. In Example 2, the opening sentence appears to introduce a topic for the paragraph, the future of Mr. Gordon Robertson, and the reader anticipates an explanation of how this future was the reason for something in the preceding paragraph. But the

second sentence begins slowly: an inverted subject follows the empty place marker there, and a meaningless copula, are. No meaning-bearing words appear until the subject, special considerations, which gets the force of being in the normal Verb Phrase position. Now seeing special considerations as a central idea, the reader moves on to sentence three, anticipating the development of considerations as a topic, but encounters another empty place marker, it, and another copula, has been, in a non-factive opening with no adequate bloc signal to relate sentence three to sentence two.

Inflated language compounds the difficulty of reading this paragraph, for unnecessary words delay still longer the search for the true topic. Example 3 is an outline of this paragraph, with central ideas in capitals and key bloc signals underlined; Example 4 calls attention to the verbosity by stressing the only words that need to be retained in the third and fourth sentences. Only twenty-nine of forty-eight words are necessary in sentence three. Sentence four is worse: less than half the words suffice, fifteen out of thirty-two. After the long delay before the subject cadre, the reader must bridge an extraordinary space between cadre and the verb could be observed. Similar to the phrase need to be taken into account in sentence two, the passive phrase could be observed forces action to take place without an agent or a clear reason. The unfortunate choice of words in fact creates a bizarre situation for the reader, who needs something concrete: could be observed draws us into watching a ritual--or, more precisely, into watching watchers of a ritual. In other words, the reader unwittingly becomes drawn into the action.

The concluding sentence of the paragraph fails its opportunity to save the rest: the vague pronoun *its* serves as a subject; yet another copula, *was*, is its verb. The true meaning of the sentence is embedded in a subordinate clause that begins with another inversion, *there were*. The key words of the sentence, which are likewise key words in the discourse, are embedded in a pair of subordinate clauses (*officers*; *periodic episodes*). In sum, the meaning of the paragraph and the relations of the parts do not become clear to the reader without vigorous effort; the writer makes the reader do his work.

The next example, Number 5, represents the *Canadian Literature* paragraphs. In this discourse, *also* in the second sentence and *her* in the fourth fail their purposes as bloc signals because what they connect is not clear. The fourth sentence is also hard to read because three long locative phrases separate the complement *practicable* from other parts of the base to which it belongs. The reader can solve the ambiguity of the pronoun by returning to the previous sentence to see that that sentence can be read as a supraordinate idea, then by considering extrinsic information, e.g., that the nieces referred to were most likely Indians, since they lived in the areas named, while Carr was not an Indian. But readers prefer smoother signals, and many readers will lack the background necessary to help sort out the ideas this way.

The same obscurity did not appear in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. Example 6 typifies this journal's style: the prose structure is clear, if unemphatic and monotonous.

Doubtless the dullness stems from the journal's rhetorical purpose, which is typically to explain the results of medical research. Passive and BE verbs dominate the sentence structure in articles that are largely summaries of data. While a high proportion of medical terms gives the paragraphs more field-specific terms than the other journals have, the many copulas used to make the statements of facts are likewise characteristic. But monotony was not obligatory: a fortunate exception demonstrated what we now call syntactic maturity, while all the examples were clear.

When I return to my question, "Do different fields have differences in style that should be taught?" tentatively my answer is "No." The term "jargon" applied contemptuously by English departments who think they use none may not have much to do with vocabulary. Instead, it seems to describe problems like wordiness, faulty reference and misplaced stress. Maybe more rampant in some fields than others, these things hardly need teaching, and a decision in favour of accepting them would be one against communication. Regarding scientific writers, although a simple style may suffice, these writers play various roles in life, which require various registers. I would not, in a general writing course, encourage a style characterized by direct statements, at the expense of teaching denser prose for a humane education.

What my research has shown me we can do, however, is diagnose problems in coherence more precisely. Far too often surface structures attract us to grammar, when we should be looking for the topics that underly and control discourse. We can move

toward more precise criticism by remembering these three generalizations about English prose: 1) it usually procedes from generalizations to specifications; 2) it is usually unsympathetic toward tangential topics; and 3) good writers of English pick up, and treat in sequence, everything they introduce.[6] While we should not use these principles prescriptively, we can use them to pinpoint problems in coherence. And we can build on them to devise systems for describing discourse in terms that explain our intuitions about structure. While contrastive rhetoric is describing the special logic of English, we can teach what is natural to the language, yet distinguish departures from natural order that seem justified for style. And whether we use Robert Kaplan's functional rhetoric or methods of our own, if we systematically identify key words in discourse blocs, discern the movement of the prose, and state the relationships of parts, we can discover causes of incoherence.

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APPENDIX

Examples

1

Most metal gears for precision work are produced by machining--various cutting processes involving the removal of metal. A widely used method of cutting spur-gear teeth is by means of a rotary cutter whose shape corresponds to the required tooth space (a so-called formed cutter). Mounted on a milling machine, the cutter takes successive cuts from the gear blank, which is rotated the correct distance after each cut to give the desired spacing of the teeth. This precisely controlled step-by-step rotation of the blank is called "indexing" and is performed by an indexing device or dividing head, which is part of the equipment of the milling machine. Similar gear-cutting operations can also be performed on a suitably equipped lathe. Helical gears can likewise be produced by the formed-cutter technique: the gear blank must be set at the correct angle to the cutter, and the work table of the milling machine must be swiveled through the helix angle of the teeth being cut, so that the plane of the cutter becomes tangent to the helix.

DU I. Topic Sentence

Most metal gears for precision work are produced by machining--
various cutting processes involving the removal of metal.

DU II. Subordinate modifier of DU I. Head:

A widely used method of cutting spur-gear teeth is by means of a rotary cutter whose shape corresponds to the required tooth space (a so-called formed cutter. Fig. 1).

A. Subordinate modifier of head
Mounted on a milling machine, the cutter takes successive cuts from the gear blank, which is rotated the correct distance after each cut to give the desired spacing of the teeth.

1. Subordinate modifier of II. A.

This precisely controlled step-by-step rotation of the blank is called "indexing" and is performed by an indexing device or dividing head, which is part of the equipment of the milling machine.

B. Sub. modifier of head
Similar gear-cutting operations can also be performed on a suitably equipped lathe.

DU III. Subordinate modifier of I; coordinate with II. Head:

Helical gears can likewise be produced by the formed-cutter technique:

A. Sub. modifier of head.
the gear blank must be set at the correct angle to the cutter,

B. Sub. modifier of head, coord. with I. A.
and the work table of the milling machine must be swiveled through the helix angle of the teeth being cut,

1. Sub. modifier of III. B.
so that the plane of the cutter becomes tangent to the helix.

13(R. Kaplan, Lecture, USC, 1977)

Another possible reason for the step at that time was the future of Mr. Gordon Robertson, who had served as Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet for as long as is probably desirable. There are special considerations which need to be taken into account in relation to the senior posts in central control agencies. It has been an accepted principle in both Britain and Canada that the senior officers of such agencies should rotate in order to avoid the creation of a central elite corps removed from the hard facts of departmental administration and remote from the rest of the public service. In Canada, at least as far as the top posts are concerned, the small cadre of senior officers, drawn mostly from Finance, the Treasury Board, External Affairs, and the Cabinet Secretariat, could be observed from time to time engaged in a sort of ritual exchange of offices. This was partly because there were so few experienced and highly competent officers to go around, and partly because such periodic episodes of musical chairs prevented a man from getting too stale at any one job.

3.

TR Another possible reason for the step at that time was the FUTURE of Mr. Gordon Robertson, who had served as Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet for as long as is probably desirable.

I. There are SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS which need to be taken into account in relation to the SENIOR POSTS in central control agencies.

A. It has been an accepted principle in both Britain and Canada that the SENIOR OFFICERS of such agencies should rotate in order to avoid the creation of a central elite corps removed from the hard facts of departmental administration and remote from the rest of the public service.

1. In Canada, at least as far as the TOP POSTS are concerned, the small cadre of SENIOR OFFICERS, drawn mostly from finance, the Treasury Board, External Affairs, and the Cabinet Secretariat, could be observed from time to time engaged in a sort of ritual exchange of offices.

a. This was partly because there were so few experienced and highly competent OFFICERS to go around, and partly because such periodic episodes of musical chairs prevented a man from getting too stale at any one job.

- Mallory[7]

4.

. . .It [is] has been an accepted principle in both Britain and Canada that the senior officers of such agencies should rotate in order to avoid the creation of a central elite corps removed from the hard facts of departmental administration and remote from the rest of the public service. In Canada, at least as far as the top posts are concerned, the small cadre of senior officers, drawn mostly from Finance, the Treasury Board, External Affairs, and the Cabinet Secretariat, could be observed from time to time engaged in a sort of ritual exchange of offices.

5.

The following summer, 1908, Carr made the first of three visits to Alert Bay, an accessible Kwakiutl village with notable figures and house posts which had already attracted artists F. M. Bell Smith, John Kyle and Statira Frame. It was also during these years that she met Sophie Frank, a native of North Vancouver's Coast Salish reserve, well-known locally for the enormous woven baskets and lush blackberries which she sold door-to-door in Vancouver. Through Mrs. Frank, Carr learned much of the Indian ways. It was probably her nieces living in areas of northern British Columbia who made Carr's 1912 trip to the Queen Charlotte Islands, the Skeena River District and points along the coast practicable. Daughters of her elder sister Clara, Lillian Nicholles, school teacher in Masset, Q.C.I., and Emily English, wife of a cannery boss at Balmoral on the Skeena, together with Methodist missionary friends of her other sisters, provided Carr with bases and contacts for exploration on perhaps the most significant of her northern excursions. So monumental was this trip for Carr, that after working up her summer sketches during the winter, she felt by spring capable of giving an exhibition and lecture based on her summer's work.

- Tippett[8]

6.

Megaloblastic changes and pancytopenia are found most often in the postoperative period. However, the condition for which the operation was performed and its preoperative complications are of major importance in the occurrence of hematologic problems with postoperative TPN. The four patients just described had documented pre-existing gastrointestinal disorders; their cases emphasize the need for assessment of folic acid or Vitamin B12 status, or both, in such patients before institution of TPN. In patients with inflammatory disease of the small and even the large intestine there is evidence for malabsorption of folic acid and vitamin B12 often early in the disease and in the absence of clinical symptoms.

- Denburg et al[9]

Notes

[1]To randomize my samples I used the fifth paragraphs of the first ten articles to appear in each journal in the year 1977, except for the Medical Association Journal. Because the special format of this journal divides the contents of articles rigidly, I had to use the first paragraph of the discussion sections. The reason I examined segments of discourse set off as paragraphs was that their indention made them easy to select and count; but of course what concerned me was not paragraph form, but discourse blocs and units.

[2]See, for example, Willis L. Pitkin, Jr., "Discourse Blocs," College Composition and Communication, 20 (1969), 138-48, and Francis Christensen, Notes Toward a New Rhetoric, New York: Harper and Row, 1967.

[3]Robert B. Kaplan, The Anatomy of Rhetoric: Prolegomena to a Functional Theory of Rhetoric, Philadelphia: The Center for Curriculum Development, Inc., 1972.

[4]Robert B. Kaplan, "Contrastive Rhetoric: Some Hypotheses," ITL, 39-40 (1978), 65.

[5]Kaplan, "Contrastive Rhetoric," p. 64.

[6]Robert B. Kaplan, Lecture in Applied Linguistics, the University of Southern California, October, 1977.

[7]J. R. Mallory, "The Two Clerks: Parliamentary Discussion of the Role of the Privy Council Office," Canadian Journal of Political Science, 10 (1977), 5.

[8]Maria Tippett, "Emily Carr's Klee Wyck," Canadian Literature, 72 (1977), 50.

[9]J. Denburg, W. Bensen, M. All, J. McBride, and J. Clok, "Megaloblastic Anemia in Patients Receiving total Parenteral Nutrition without Folic Acid or Vitamin B12 Supplementation," Canadian Medical Association Journal, 117 (1977), 146.